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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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The Golkar National Congress: High Stakes in the Indonesian Succession Game

Summary

Jockeying for the leadership of Golkar--the government's de facto political party--at its National Congress in late October is shaping into a struggle between the two most powerful institutions in Indonesia, the military and the civil bureaucracy. Institutional and personal objections to Vice President Sudharmono--Golkar's general chairman--have prompted the military to reassert its traditional dominant role in the party. Because Golkar dominates Parliament and the government, its new leadership is likely to play a significant role in the transfer of power when the Soeharto era ends.

This memorandum was prepared by The [redacted] Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 11 October 1988 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, [redacted]

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In our judgment, President Soeharto is taking advantage of the Congress and personal conflict between Sudharmono and Defense Minister Murdani to provoke the military's interest in Golkar and thereby ensure that the politically restive military works within the established political system. If the new Golkar leadership is unacceptable to the military, however, Soeharto risks alienating the military--an outcome that would increasingly polarize power and risk a contested succession.

The National Congress: Preparation for the Succession?

Although President Soeharto's term runs to 1993, and he firmly holds power, in our judgment, Indonesian political discussion is increasingly focusing on the eventual succession. As speculation over who will succeed Soeharto grows, and as uncertainty mounts over the future of the country's political institutions, Golkar's ability to run elections and deliver votes makes it a prized political base. (See the appendix: A Sketch of Golkar)

Golkar's National Congress--held every five years to elect a national leadership and set goals for political activities--assumes particular importance this year because, [redacted] Indonesian politicians believe that Soeharto has charged Golkar with preparing for the succession.

Going for the Prize: Golkar's General Chairmanship

This year's Congress, which will be held in Jakarta from 20 to 25 October, will bring together approximately 1,300 delegates: according to Indonesian press reports, 400 will be appointed by Golkar's Central Executive Board, and the rest will be sent from Golkar's provincial and regional governing boards.

The selection of a new Central Executive Board, including the general chairmanship, will be the most closely watched event at the October Congress. Vice President Sudharmono, Golkar's general chairman since 1983, has quietly indicated to the press that he is interested in remaining as chairman for another five-year term.

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Because the final decision on Golkar's chairman will be made by Soeharto alone, he is probably floating these criteria to provide the appearance of democracy and as a method to assess strengths of various candidates. In our judgment, Soeharto is probably most concerned that the next Golkar chairman be loyal to him and have the organizational ability to handle the massive Golkar bureaucracy. By Soeharto's criteria, rumored candidates such as Minister of Cooperatives Bustanil Arifin, Minister of Home Affairs Rudini, and Coordinating Minister Soepardjo Rustam are possibilities. Rudini--who has not taken sides in the conflicts between the military and Sudharmono--has the advantage of being from the Home Affairs Ministry, a traditional power base in Indonesian politics because of its role in administering elections.

In recent months, Indonesian political observers and the media have concentrated on the open power struggle between Minister of Defense Leonardus B. (Benny) Murdani and Sudharmono, who have long been rivals for influence with Soeharto. The personal rivalry took on an added dimension last March, when Soeharto apparently favored Sudharmono by selecting him as Vice President--despite objections raised by Murdani on behalf of the military.

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Murdani versus Sudharmono--Personality Clash or Institutional Conflict?

In our judgment, the clash between Murdani and Sudharmono obscures a larger issue that has been debated in Indonesia for over a decade: the Armed Forces' role in domestic politics and Golkar. Until the 1970s, the Armed Forces (ABRI) used Golkar as a tool to combat the Indonesian Communist Party, the PKI. From 1975 to 1983, however, the military apparently reconsidered its extensive political involvement and, as part of a "return to the barracks" strategy, streamlined its organization, reducing its profile in Golkar and eliminating a large number of its sociopolitical positions.

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The Outcome: Implications for the Succession

Despite the many rumors and so-called criteria, Soeharto's choices for top leadership positions in Golkar are difficult to predict, in part because Soeharto keeps his own counsel and enjoys playing off competing factions. Political observers have often described Soeharto as a "dalang"--the puppet master of the Indonesian shadow plays--because of his skill in manipulating his subordinates.

We believe that Soeharto has been playing on military opposition to Sudharmono to provoke its interest in Golkar. As a result, Soeharto has apparently forced ABRI to reconsider its earlier move to separate from Golkar--a step threatening his goal of molding Golkar into a successful, unchallenged political party. Moreover, Soeharto's position is most secure if the military channels its political ambitions through Golkar--which Soeharto controls--rather than outside the political system.

The danger for Soeharto, however, is that in fostering competition and keeping people off balance, he may push the military too far or find himself unable to contain its resurgent political interests. In the event, for example, that Soeharto selects a Golkar general chairman unacceptable to the military, such as Sudharmono or one of his proteges--or allows Sudharmono to retain authority by moving him to Golkar's Advisory Council--Soeharto risks increasing the military's alienation from his regime. An angry or dissatisfied military would threaten Soeharto's strategy for Golkar election victories and introduce a new element of uncertainty to Indonesia's political future.

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Appendix A Sketch of Golkar

Golkar does not easily fit Western concepts of a political or government organization. Its full name, Golongan Karya--"functional group"--was coined in 1964 by former President Sukarno to refer to a conglomeration of groups representing the professions, trades, military, and religious and social organizations. Sukarno intended this group as an alternative to political parties and the first step toward Indonesian socialism. In recent years, President Soeharto, who, like his predecessor, is opposed to the chaos believed likely from a multiparty system, refurbished Golkar as his regime's political machine.

Although Golkar's leadership denies it is a political party, it nevertheless functions much like a party. On a day-to-day basis, Golkar is charged with mobilizing support for the Soeharto regime and its development goals as well as promoting Soeharto's program to the rest of the society. Golkar's role is aided by the 299 seats it controls in the 500-seat Parliament.

During national elections Golkar's organizational advantages become most apparent. For example, almost all government ministries, the local government structure, and the Army territorial commands can be mobilized to provide equipment, personnel, and support at all levels of Golkar. The Minister of Home Affairs--a statutory member of Golkar--heads the Supervisory Board organizing the elections. Other election administrators, such as governors and village heads, are also Golkar members. Although Golkar and the two nominal opposition parties are allowed to have governing boards down to the regional levels, only Golkar is authorized to have commissioners and assistants at the town and village level, giving it a substantial advantage over other political organizations.

Golkar, in its present state, is a collection of some 270 functional groups of, according to press reports, up to 25 million people. It strongly emphasizes hierarchical organization and patron-client relationships. By law, all civil servants are members of KORPRI (the civil servants association) and therefore part of Golkar. At the village and district level, the local government official and the local Golkar representative are often the same person.

Since 1983, Golkar has attempted to develop and build grassroots support by shifting from being a federation of functional groups to a mass-based, individual-membership organization. To date, according to Indonesian press reports, some 8 million members have been registered as cadres. The Golkar leadership, however, has yet to clarify what happens to its functional groups once a switch to individual membership is complete. Moreover, cadre commitment and quality have been questioned because many were signed up only to meet quotas set by Jakarta. There has been some reluctance to register, particularly among the rural population, where memories of Communist Party registration and its consequences are still strong. Opponents of Golkar's push for cadres are quick to point out that only two other parties in Indonesian history had individual membership--the now-banned Indonesian Socialist and Communist Parties.

Despite the regime's efforts, Golkar does not have an independent identity or solid roots in society. [redacted] the Indonesian public views Golkar as a creature of the Soeharto regime, while the political elite view it with scepticism and cynicism but recognize it as a path to power and privilege. As with attendance at seminars on national awareness or the Pancasila philosophy, many civil servants regard membership in Golkar as "ticket punching" necessary to further their careers. Nevertheless, military backing and its own dispensing of patronage have provided Golkar with substantial victories in national elections. [redacted]

To establish a firm grip on Indonesia's political life, Golkar apparently realizes it must gain the support of the youth, the most rapidly growing sector of the electorate. Indeed, we believe that the National Congress is likely to highlight generational change. Although Golkar is still largely dominated by veterans of the 1945 war for independence, [redacted]

In another effort to improve its image and develop wider popular support, this year for the first time Golkar is using a "bottom up" approach in which district and provincial congresses select local party leaders and delegates to the National Congress. Previously, Golkar held the National Congress first and then selected local leaders. [redacted]

Although Golkar is publicizing the "bottom up" system as more democratic, the entire process is nonetheless heavily controlled from Golkar's offices in Jakarta. [redacted]

On the national level, Golkar is led by a Central Executive Board (DPP), where the general chairman and the secretary-general hold day-to-day authority. Many of the DPP members hold concurrent government posts or are members of parliament. Above the DPP are two other bodies that the DPP must consult before making decisions. The Advisory Council, chaired and appointed by Soeharto, has a membership of 40. The Advisory Council has the power to activate, act as, or overrule the DPP. Because of the Council's large size, a 16-member Daily Presidium, now chaired by Soeharto loyalist, Gen. (retired) Maraden Panggabean, ordinarily exercises the Council's functions. Despite this structure, and the presence of many retired military officers in the governing bodies, Indonesian and foreign political observers agree that it is Soeharto who makes Golkar's final decisions. [redacted]